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Commentary on Cunningham

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In Response to: Cunningham's *Philosophizing Propaganda*

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On page 5, Cunningham calls for a systematic account of propaganda in terms of epistemological status. "Use of the word 'propaganda'," he says, "is already a statement about the effective quality of information transmitted, received and believed, and its suspect purposes.

But can there be a systematic account along these lines when generalizations about propaganda have notable and solid exceptions?. For example, in the National Film Board production of the life of John Grierson there is a dramatic and unforgettable scene describing the time when he listened to German propaganda at the time of the Dieppe raid. He concluded that the propaganda machine was telling the truth about a Canadian disaster, and he cancelled what was to have been triumphant Canadian propaganda about victory at Dieppe. He spread the word that the story should be played down. The conclusion is that while propaganda is inherently suspect epistemologically, it is not necessarily deceptive and that other attributes of propagandistic communication may offset the belief-unworthiness that we might normally attribute to propaganda. So any epistemology of propaganda has to take into account the fact that it can sometimes be eminently truthful.

On Ellul's point, about "the impossibility of clearly distinguishing between propaganda and information, I read into this the idea of the impossibility of distinguishing always between propaganda and information. Cunningham focuses squarely on the question of the definition of propaganda. He sees the absence of agreement about the definition of the term as resulting in theoretical disarray regarding treatments of the subject. He thinks that philosophical analysis will enhance our understanding of propaganda by disclosing its epistemological foundations, which I take to mean disclosure of the relationship between propaganda and genuine knowledge.

On this basis he thinks that propaganda discussions rightly belong in the discipline of philosophy. I share his view that philosophy has a central role to play in propaganda analysis. But in addition to the epistemological concern there is to my mind the equally important concern for ethical communication. Cunningham mentions this both in the abstract and at the end of his paper. But I seem to find myself inevitably raising ethical questions in the course of epistemological enquiries, not just at the end of them. We ought to seek knowledge. We ought to believe what is true. But truth is not always readily obtainable. Different truths compete for our investigation and attention. As a society, we find the search for truth taking on the level of a meta- question: should X dollars be spent on learning about GMO's and potential health or environmental hazards? Should they be spent on prostate cancer research or on whatever the new term is for the strategic defence initiatives?

Cunningham identifies propaganda with an array of epistemologically deficient forms of communication. As he puts it, propaganda "subordinates truth to the lesser modalities of attention, credibility and utility."

One problem with this approach, with which I am in total sympathy, is that even with the utmost concern for communicating truth and only truth, one cannot so easily make the "lesser modalities of attention, credibility and utility" subordinate to it. You deal with audiences as you find them. Aristotle cites with approval corny showmanship, the raised voice and hyperbole,

designed to rouse a soporific audience. So much for attention. And we know about facts in wartime that were suppressed, not because they were not true, but because they would not be believable and the public would resent what they perceived as propaganda. So much for the question of credibility. And we all have occasion to suppress the expression of truthful thoughts that give offence to people and cause emotional suffering. So much for utility. To speak of the "lesser modality of utility" is to assume the primacy of epistemology over ethics, of truth over the ethics of speaking the truth. There is much to be said both for and against that proposition. I prefer the view of Hans Urs von Balthazar that Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are jealous sisters, and one cannot raise one above the others without having the other two exact their revenge until equality is restored.

It seems that truth needs to be accommodated to situational communicative demands. Whether we should view this as "subordinating" truth to these demands will often be unclear. I believe that with propaganda as generally understood we deal with a mass audience, but on the issue of subordinating truth to the exigencies of communication we can set that aspect aside and deal with one-on-one situations. I have come across two stories, both from Belgium. Both cases were of adults talking to children. In the first instance, Belgium was being bombed and a small child was terrified. Not knowing how to pacify the child, the parent hit on the idea of making use of two things that the child knew. One was that her grandmother had recently died. The other was that her late grandmother had loved to bowl. Being a believing Christian family, the father told the child that the noise he heard was of grandmother bowling with Jesus in heaven. And that made the child happy again. Are we going to describe this as propaganda, in all respects except the matter of mass audience? The term does not sit well, for me. Secondly, there is the case of nuns who produced "letters from heaven," letters purporting to come directly from Jesus. These letters praise a young boy and suggested that he had a vocation for the priesthood. In adult life the boy resented this form of what thought of, rightly, I think, of rather heavy illegitimate persuasion. A message from Jesus, to an audience of Christian believers, comes with the highest conceivable ethos. I do not mind thinking of this as having an essential connection with what we think of as propaganda.

If I am right in my sense of what is and what is not propaganda, then the matter of epistemological shadiness cannot be, on its own, the sum total of what constitutes propaganda. Ellul linked propaganda to the attempt through communication to gain or maintain power over others. In the second example I have given it is not difficult to see an element of power and control in the nuns' actions, although I can also imagine that they might have had a sincere desire to encourage the child in the future they saw as best for him. But in the first example I think we can see much more easily invented story as told solely with a view to assuaging the child's torment rather than gaining power over him.